THE POETICS OF CONVERSION AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION IN ENDŌ SHUSAKU’S SILENCE

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The pivotal scene in Endō Shūsaku’s historical novel Silence (Chinmoku, published 1966) depicts an act that is both an apostasy and a conversion.

The priest grasped the fumie with both hands and brought it close to his eyes. He wanted to press to his own face the face that had been trampled by so many feet. With sad countenance he stared intently at the man in the center of the fumie, worn down and concave with the constant press of feet. Tears gathered in his eyes. “Ah,” he said trembling, “the pain!”

“It is only a formality. What do formalities matter?” The interpreter was urging him on excitedly. “You only have to go through the exterior form of trampling.”

The priest raised his foot. In it he felt a dull, heavy pain. This was no mere formality. He would now trample on what he considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot ached. And then, at that moment, the person on that bronze plate looked straight at him and told him to go ahead. It is all right to trample on me. More than anyone else I understand the ache in your foot. It is all right to trample. I was born into this world in order to be stepped on by people like you, and I bore the cross in order to share all men’s pain.

Dawn broke the moment this priest brought his foot down on the image. A cock crowed in the distance.¹

The priest is a fictional character named Sebastian Rodrigues, a Portuguese Jesuit modeled on the real-life apostate Giuseppe Chiara. Endō’s depiction of Rodrigues focuses on the priest’s inner turmoil with regard to his mission—a struggle that sets the stage for his apostasy and reveals the full extent of the spiritual and psychic ruptures caused by

the decision to step on the *fumie*. The feelings of shame and guilt that haunt Rodrigues after his apostasy are apparent in his attempts to try to justify and redeem himself by reinscribing his personal story onto the larger narrative of Christ’s life. In the closing chapters of *Silence* Rodrigues insists that deep inside he has not renounced his faith, but has achieved a more self-reflective, critical consciousness that permits a new understanding of the nature of his faith.

Though the novel is primarily concerned with the nature of religious belief, Rodrigues’s story also carries with it the weight of the history of European expansionism. Contact with radically other cultures, belief systems, and political and economic practices transformed Western cultures, shaping how they conceived their place and identity in the world. The consciousness of difference that Europeans experienced in their encounters with the unfamiliar was disruptive in that it made visible the ways in which the institutions and practices that defined Western cultures and identities were constructed and justified. The challenge to claims of timeless and universal values posed by the recognition of relative difference may have led, as often as not, to chauvinistic reaffirmations of long-held beliefs, but the effort to resist, control, or subjugate non-Western cultures is evidence of the force that colonial encounters exerted on the consciousness of identity.

The conversion depicted in *Silence* is the outcome of both a struggle with the meaning of religious faith and a clash of cultures. Within these psychological and social contexts conversion is presented as an ongoing negotiation between competing narratives of identity. An analysis of the experience of conversion must therefore account not only for the historical facts of such an experience, which would include observable changes in beliefs, outlooks, and practices, but also for the habits of thought and processes of composition revealed by the discursive practices of conversion narratives. In the case of *Silence* Endō’s novel reveals in the play of its words the narrative transformations that make conversion possible, suggesting that an analysis of conversion is in some measure a venture in poetics.

### Conversion and Heterodox Identity

The plot of *Silence* is set in motion by the plan of a small number of priests, including Rodrigues, to secretly enter Japan in 1643 with the aim of reviving the Christian mission there. At its height in the late sixteenth century the Japanese mission had converted, by some esti-